

ESSAYS IN LENT

HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

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BY
HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE



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ESSAYS IN LENT

I

THE BATTLE OF LIFE

THE Lenten season gains every year a wider observance, not only because many churches have always observed it, but also because Christians of every name feel the need of remembering the great experience which it commemorates. No recorded experience has been studied with greater seriousness or deeper reverence. Those to whom Christ is the Master of life and those to whom he is one among

several great religious teachers are agreed that the forty days in the wilderness hold a unique place in the history of the human spirit. There have been many interpretations of the mysterious happenings in that lonely vigil, and its symbolic meaning has grown as patient and reverent thought has striven to penetrate the solitude in which the man who called himself the Son of God as well as the Son of Man went through a struggle which cleared his vision, set his will immovably to fulfill a mission of divine helpfulness, and sent him in radiant strength on the road to Calvary and to the morning of the resurrection. Henceforth there

was for him perfect union with the Father; and unclouded faith in the heavenly vision kept him courageous amid the misery of the world, and tranquil and serene in the presence of death.

In that lonely struggle the one fact that stands out with tragic and splendid distinctness is that Christ was fighting for his soul. The temptations which assail men at every stage of the journey and make life a long battle met him on the very threshold and challenged him at the very start to prove his worthiness to be the redeemer of the race. He who was to save the souls of men must first save his own soul; he who was to

win the battle of life for others must first win it for himself.

It was a clear and definite issue that was fought out in the wilderness; it has been fought out every day since; it is the one fundamental issue in history. It is often concealed by other and more obvious issues; there are those who deny that there is any such issue; what is called civilization seems at times to have disproved its existence until civilization suddenly gives way and men find themselves standing on the edges of appalling abysses, and realize that under the fairest landscape there sleep to-day, as there slept a thousand years ago, the forces that rend and


wreck in thirty seconds the work of thirty centuries.

Time and wealth and beauty and the growth of order have changed the form of the age-old and unending battle which all men must fight to keep their souls alive. It is a beautiful world; it is crowded with absorbing interests; it is a better world than it used to be because more men and women are fighting the battle for their souls; in the future it will help them through wiser laws and more wholesome conditions to make the fight. But to the end of the world every man and woman must fight for the soul. No change in institutions and laws, no

refinement of ways of living, no loveliness which art can bring to humanity, will ever win the battle once for all. Every age must fight for its soul as this age is fighting to-day, and every man and woman must pass through that struggle. It is inherent in the very nature of a stage of life which, through temptation and struggle, offers us the strength and purity which alone make God and heaven credible and real.

II

THE OLD FIGHT

OCIETY has become partially Christianized; there is now no authority on earth which can compel men to choose between loyalty to their faith and death; there are no longer pagan gods to whom Christians must offer sacrifices or go into the arena. There are martyrs in every country in the world, but martyrdom is no longer dramatized; the victim dies after long suffering hidden from the world.

There is no longer a place of torment luridly pictured and of a visible and haunting terror; and many people seem to think that there is no longer any hell, and that men can now live as they choose, with no thought of a broken law, a righteous judge, and an unescapable penalty impartially imposed and inevitably borne. And yet what men call hell, a place or state of remorse, of moral degeneration, of agony of mind and body, was never so obvious and tragic a reality as to-day. It is no longer necessary to open Dante's "Inferno" to find it; it is only necessary to unfold the morning newspaper. Its first

page is crowded with reports of the misery which follows fast and sure on every violation of the laws of life. Disease and death wait, not as specters, but as the executioners of the laws of science on every offender; murder in every possible form is so familiar to the reporter that unless circumstances or persons are unusual it finds only a brief space; men fleeing from justice and women from disgrace are figures so familiar that they attract scanty attention; loss of integrity, betrayal of honor, blighting of home, loss of reputation and influence, are part of the history of the day.

And with whatever bravado

men and women face these penalties, sooner or later, if one follows their careers, the inevitable tragedy is revealed. Unless and until there comes a place and an hour of repentance, these unhappy victims of passion, violators of honor, betrayers of their own souls, are in a hell of which Dante drew but a faint picture.


The man who was asked if he believed in hell, and answered that he was in it, brought out clearly a radical change of thought. The ignorant or literal-minded once thought of hell as a place of fiery torment prepared by an offended God for the future punishment of evil-doers; we know that it is an

experience of suffering involved in the very structure of our natures, which begins here and now, and is an expression of divine love. The suffering of which men think when they think of hell is of to-day; it waits for no future, it begins now, and it will continue until the offender is purified.

The issue which every man must face is precisely what it was when Christ faced it in the wilderness: Shall a man save his soul? Words and symbols have changed, but the battle of life is as inevitable, as fateful, as desperate, as it was a thousand years ago.

III

THE INWARD PUNISHMENT

ORDS, symbols, and forms of thought have changed; but the truths and facts behind them remain unchanged. A flaming hell no longer terrifies men; and heaven, expressed by material symbols, no longer inspires them to holy living. But heaven and hell are all the more real because we largely fashion them ourselves. That is to say, they are not waiting for us,

arbitrarily created as places of reward or punishment according to the deeds done in the body; rather we have been so fashioned that by the play of the laws which God has written in our natures we not only decide whither we shall go, but what shall await us. We no longer say we shall be immortal; we know that we are immortal. Heaven and hell are not only outside, but within us; and no man can go to either destination until he has made himself ready by inward preparation. The good man who accidentally found himself in hell would not really be there; and a bad man who might stray into heaven would find it

hell by sheer force of contrast between himself and his surroundings.

The moral law written in our natures is more inescapable and inexorable than when it was written on tables of stone. No man can escape because he keeps the record himself. M. Bergson's little book on "Dreams" is full of fearful intimations of immortality. It tells us that nothing we have ever said, thought, felt, or done is forgotten; that we carry with us an ineffaceable record which time cannot blur and death will not erase. Shakespeare repeated long ago in dramatic form what the Bible has enforced with the noblest

imagery and the most startling distinctness: that what a man is he has made himself; that his past travels with him; that, while his sins may be forgotten, their effects cannot be eradicated by the most bitter and searching repentance. The promise of Christ is that he shall deliver us from our sins, not from their consequences.

Many people in the world do not think of the law until they see the constable or policeman. They either lack imagination or the spiritual sense which makes a man aware that, however peaceful the day may be and however beautiful the landscape, there are laws written in the world about him


which are full of tragic possibilities if he disobeys.

The world is full of moral disorder because man is free; but there is no moral anarchy, because no lawbreaker escapes. The most awful quality of the hell of which men know and in which many of them live to-day is its disintegrating, benumbing, paralyzing effect. Most of us have seen some man begin, in the flush of a vigorous manhood, to violate the law of temperance; we have seen his will slowly yield, his habits interfere with his efficiency, his ability decline, the shadow creep over his home, his friends regard him with ineffectual sympathy, physical de-

generacy set in, until finally he becomes an unorganized mass of matter without conscience or will or capacity, returning to the elements before he is physically dead. There is nothing more appalling or revolting, and the most awful aspect of it is that the man himself does not know what is happening. He grows less and less sensitive, and the more repulsive he becomes the less he realizes the death in life which everyone else sees in him. He lives in hell. At the beginning that fact may strike home to him, but as time goes on he is less and less conscious that he is a lost soul.

IV

THE LATEST TEMPTA- TION

 HE sense of something sinister and malign in the world seems to have come to men as soon as they began to see the world and to think about what they saw. And with primitive men to think of an evil influence was to personify it, and so the devil entered into human thought and has remained to this day. He has assumed many forms and worn many costumes; he has

been brutal, hideous, repulsive, terrifying; and he has been urbane, polished, insinuating. He has been an incarnation of ugliness, foulness, corruption; and he has been a well-bred, cultivated man of the world. He has been a nightmare of terror; a Satan born an angel and led astray by ambition; and he has been Mephistopheles, a fascinating companion, offering to make men as gods in knowledge and freedom to will and to do as they pleased.

In all these forms the spirit of evil has borne himself according to the fashion of the time; and has expressed in figure and bearing the thought of the age. To the

savage as well as to those who have gone a part of the way toward civilization he has been a hideous and dreaded enemy to be resisted and made powerless by charms and incantations; in the Norse mythology he is the god of fire, disintegrating and destructive; from the towers of Notre Dame he looks down on Paris with a sinister and malign sneer; in Marlowe's "Faustus" he is a melodramatic devil, crude, vulgar, and without disguise; in "Paradise Lost" he is a great spirit fallen from heaven and clothed with a certain tragic dignity; in Goethe's masterpiece he is a specious, insinuating tempter, an actor in the drama of life

whose part is to suggest a greater freedom to men and to promise that which life cannot give—supreme and abiding satisfaction in power, knowledge, and pleasure secured without discipline and without the restraint of law.

The devil, in a word, has ceased to wear the face of a demon and the garb of an outlaw; he has become respectable; he knows the moral and social conventions, and, so long as it serves his purposes, observes them; he sometimes goes to church; he no longer shudders behind his mask when the cross confronts him, nor does he shrink from the test of holy water. He is no longer repulsive to the eye,

but he is more malignant and hideous spiritually than was the devil that tempted our ancestors; he no longer wears his nature in his face and proclaims his calling by his dress, and he is therefore more dangerous. To the earlier generations he was an open foe; to us he is a secret enemy; he has always been the father of lies, but to-day he wears the air of truth.

“Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil,” is his age-old promise; to-day he says, “Ye are gods and your will is law, for ye are beyond good and evil.” Liberty, the right to live freely and boldly, to pluck the fruit of the tree of knowledge and disregard

the rules of the garden as outgrown restrictions laid on children, are his lures. "Be yourself at all costs," says the Superman, who is the latest incarnation of the evil spirit. "If you have an impulse, follow it; it is the law of your nature, and there is no other law."

"If you want power or wealth, take it by fair means or foul; to the strong there is no right or wrong—all things are yours to use as you choose. If others stand in your way, push them aside or beat them down; all things are yours because you are strong."

"Your passions are strong; gratify them; you have a right to the full and free expression of

your nature; marriage is a concession to artificial conventions; you have attained freedom. Cast all restraint aside. If society is thrown into confusion and children are blighted by divorce, and impurity poisons social life at the fountain, do not hesitate to live your own life; you have a right to happiness. Take it."

So the devil of evil talks to his victims to-day, profaning the great words freedom, love, and life, and making them mere synonyms for abject bondage, lust, and hard, brutal selfishness; and the misery, disillusion, vulgarity, and tragedy that are the harvest of his lies are written in

every newspaper. "There is no battle of life," he says, as he betrays to dishonor and spiritual shame and death all those who believe him.

V

THE DENIAL OF LIFE

IT has often been said that the supreme issue in life is the existence of God. The real battle is the battle between faith and atheism. No man escapes this struggle; no man evades this issue. At bottom it is not a matter of confessions and creeds; it is a matter of the whole bent and drift of a man's life. There are atheists who affirm their faith in words, and there are believers who deny in words and

believe profoundly in spirit and deed. The possibility of sin is involved in all moral life; wherever character is possible sin is also possible; wherever there is freedom every man must choose between atheism and faith. "The chance to sin is wrapped up in the very fact that we are men. We could not have the lofty hopes of heaven without having, too, the haunting fear of hell," said Phillips Brooks in a notable sermon. "And here," he added, "is the only real light we get upon the problem of evil. It is not conceivable that man should have the chance of being good without the other chance of being evil."

No man can escape the possibility of sinning until he escapes from life itself. But this possibility is not the evidence of the corruption of his nature; it is the price he pays for being a man and not an automaton, a mechanism without volition, imagination, the sublime capacity for faith, love, sacrifice.

Life is a great adventure of the spirit, and there can be no adventure without danger; "our sins are born deep in the bosom of our chances." Here we come face to face with the most terrible aspect of sin; all imagery of the spirit of evil is external and crude in the presence of the truth that it is the

denial of God, the betrayal of the soul. As a father suffers with the son who has committed a crime and shares in spirit his shame and punishment, so God suffers for the sins of the world. The supreme agony of the cross was not pain of body but anguish of soul that men should strike down the hands that held out to them purity, freedom, love, and peace, and choose hatred, corruption, and strife in their place.

The boy who breaks the law of the school thinks he is asserting his freedom and defeating arbitrary authority, and does not know that he is cheating himself. The discipline which he tries to evade was

not devised for the school; it embodies the larger experience of older men eager to fit him for tasks and opportunities which he neither foresees nor understands. Sin is always denial, not only of God, but of our divinest possibilities; in disobedience of the laws of God we bury our freedom instead of asserting it, narrow life instead of broadening it, and cheat ourselves instead of evading God.


For sin is not so much a defiance of God as a denial of our own souls; it is not so much a violation of law as it is a betrayal of ourselves. Every newspaper confirms the truth of the awful doom, "The soul that sins, it shall die;" but it

is not death by a process of law: it is suicide. That death is often so gradual that those to whom it is coming are unaware of it. Every denial of life, which is part of every denial of God, involves a lowering of the standards, a blurring of the lines between right and wrong, a coarsening of the nature, a deadening of the finer sensibilities, a blighting of that purity of heart which is the possession of those who see God. It is one of the tragedies of an age of publicity that the violators of the higher standards, who defend themselves and others like them in the newspapers, do not realize how strikingly they confirm the sanctity

of the broken law by their unconscious revelation of the havoc already wrought in their own natures.

VI

THE PRICE OF THE SOUL

HE health of society is being more rigorously guarded than ever before. As fast as science discovers the sources of disease she lays upon us the duty of removing them. Drainage, sanitation, pure water and milk, good food, are no longer matters of choice; they are matters of necessity. Public health is a public duty; an epidemic of typhoid fever is a disgrace to a

community; it is an evidence of criminal ignorance or criminal carelessness. The time is coming when death as the result of laxity of supervision or indifference will involve a penalty on the offending community. Health is an achievement; it can be secured and preserved only by ceaseless vigilance.

Society can exist only by sustained exertion of body, mind, and soul; the life of men in the world depends on sleepless fidelity and effort. Play is as much a part of life as work, but play is a refuge from work, a relaxation from the strain of attention it involves. The race will never be able to retire from activity and live on its

accumulated capital. The conditions of work will probably become easier; it is certain that they will be made to conform to a keener sense of justice. They will secure wider leisure, but they will never make idleness possible. If society ever attempts to sit with folded hands and give itself up to pleasure on the fortune bequeathed to it by its vigorous and tireless ancestors, it will go into bankruptcy of character and estate.

No business can be so solidly founded, so wisely organized, that it will go on its successful way by its own momentum; it must be served by fresh ability, managed

with ever-renewed skill, or it will be overtaken by disaster.

The Church cannot thrive on the traditions of a great past, preserve the reverence of the world by recalling and repeating the names of the saints, or serve the twentieth century by using slavishly the words and methods of the apostolic age. It must understand the conditions and temper of the men and women of to-day, it must have the consecration of saintly lives in this generation, it must renew its youth in fresh vows and modern forms of activity. In every art subsidence of the creative spirit follows fast on loss of present

courage, faith, and confidence; the spirit of the masters lives, not in the copyists whose easels are set up in every art gallery, but in the works that throb with the vitality of to-day and are beautiful with the light of this morning.

We are finding out in this country that democracy is not an end in itself but a method which demands more work and thought and devotion from more people than any other form of government. A perfect system of administration of public interests directed by weak, incompetent, and corrupt men would fail as disastrously as the most irresponsible oligarchy. In the whole

world nothing will do its work without constant oversight except some kinds of automatic machinery; and machinery wears out and must be renewed. Vigilance is the price, not only of progress in society, but of health and safety. Men must not only guard but renew their possessions.

A man's character is determined by the habit he establishes of choosing the good or the evil thing; it is at stake every day; it must be reinforced every hour. In a weak moment, or a passing mood to which he surrenders his will, he may wreck it; the battle must begin again every morning, and ends only when night falls. How-

ever we may explain it, we cannot shut our eyes to the downward drift in society; a drift which can be overcome only by resolute and sustained effort. The moment this effort is relaxed moral standards become blurred, men begin to degenerate, communities begin to decay.

For society as for the individual, moral disease and death follow fast every relaxation of moral effort. Society must fight hourly for its life, and for every man and woman the same struggle is appointed. The soldier who sleeps on sentry duty is a traitor, however patriotic his intentions may be; the best purpose in the

world will not help him when the line he was set to guard is broken and the enemy has pressed through; he must not only mean well, he must keep awake.

A soul is a priceless possession; no present standards of measurement can give us any real sense of its intrinsic value; it can be kept in safety only by tireless vigilance.

VII

GOOD FRIDAY

THE tragedies of life are not sickness and death; these are its passing shadows, its sorrows by the way, grievously heavy at the moment, but neither disintegrating nor weakening. The death which follows an act of sacrifice, of courage, of faith, opens a door through which a great light shines; it may bring great sadness; it cannot bring the sense of futility which strikes all meaning out of

life, or the sense of the victory of evil which shrouds it in the gloom of eternal orphanage. Lincoln's death at the moment of emergence from that long anguish of soul was unspeakably sad; but the hour of his going was the beginning of a revelation of his spirit and service which is the most priceless possession of this Nation. When a man's life opens the door of hope for all time to come and lights the mysterious path of life as with a great torch, the sadness is for the hour, and the strengthening of faith in service and love is a permanent addition to the wealth of humanity.

That wealth is spiritual; men

have tried again and again to live by bread alone and have gone near to starvation, and then the bread has mercifully been taken from them and they have heard again the word of God and health and sanity have come back to them. There is no life-giving and life-sustaining power in wealth, comfort, ease; if these things are rightly used, they set men free for high endeavors and they make splendid service possible; but they cannot feed the spirit, and to try to live upon them is to starve. The events that strike our mortality are infinitely sad; but the tragedies of life are those events that strike our immortality, that destroy

faith, weaken hope, blur the vision, and devitalize the will. The man who accidentally kills his fellow may bring grief and anguish to many; but the man who violates a sacred trust, breaks a holy vow, uses a good reputation to hide an evil life, strikes at the souls of his fellows.

There are many kinds of sadness in life, but the tragedies are one and all rooted in the immoralities of the world. The hurricane and earthquake destroy the work of generations in a moment and bring widespread misery and death in their train; but they open the heart of the world, and sympathy and help flow like a

fertilizing tide over the devastation. Strength does not fail, hope does not die, the flame of courage does not sink in the ashes of a final despair. Men begin at once to plan, to work, to look ahead to other homes and harvests; the foundations on which life rests have not been destroyed.

The real possession of the race is neither wealth nor safety; it is faith in God. While that remains no catastrophe is final or fatal; when that goes, no prosperity has any value, sacrifice is futile, love is a mockery, life is a lie. Then the ultimate wisdom shrinks into the appalling words, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

It is easy to blur the edges of sin, and many men and women are deceiving themselves with the idea that divine laws, like human laws, can be evaded. They forget that divine laws are automatic; they are not imposed from without, but are wrought into our natures. They are so much a part of us that they need no external authority to enforce the penalties of disobedience. They can be neither evaded nor blurred. The identification of sin with death would seem incredible if it rested solely on the authority of an oldfashioned book like the Bible; but it is the most modern fact reported by the daily newspapers. They repeat it

day after day with pitiful reiteration.

The tragedy is played by new actors, with variation of incident, but always with the same *dénouement*. First a faint blurring of the standards, followed by a little lowering of tone hardly perceptible for a time. Then a deadening of moral sensitiveness, a fading of the vision of an ordered and noble world; a coarsening of taste, a loss of spiritual refinement, a vulgarization of the whole nature; then a growing skepticism of the presence of God in the world, of the reality of the soul, and of the distinction between right and wrong. Then indiffer-

ence to moral law, the craving for physical excitement and diversion, the loss of modesty and shame.

These are they who weaken the hope of the world, blight its promise, and destroy its capital of purity and strength. Their fall is the tragedy of the world; there is no other tragedy, for misfortune and calamity hurt the body, but they who violate the laws of life harm the soul. They crucify the Christ again.

VIII

EASTER MORNING: THE VICTORY

THE temptation in the desert came at the beginning of Christ's ministry, the opening of the tomb in the garden at the end; many months of teaching, healing, lonely fellowship with those who walked with him and yet were separated from him by a chasm of misunderstanding, lay between the hour of struggle in the solitude and the hour of victory in the garden; but one followed the other as in-

evitably as the reaping follows the sowing. The resurrection was predicted by the rejection of evil; when Christ came back from his vigil in the desert, he had already conquered sin and death.

In the struggle through which he had passed the mortal nature had fought for supremacy with the immortal nature, the body had striven with the spirit, and the body had been defeated. Immortality triumphed over mortality as certainly in the desert as on the morning of the resurrection. The fight with death was won at the beginning, not at the end, of his career. If his followers had achieved at that moment the gift

of vision which came to them later, they would have seen him transfigured and in companionship with the saints of their nation when he came to them from the mysterious and lonely struggle in the desert. Henceforth his life moved like a beam of light through the darkness and confusion of the world. There was no uncertainty in that brief and crowded career; there was great sorrow, the awful burden of the sin of the world was laid on that stainless and loving soul, loneliness enfolded him like the air he breathed, he was sometimes almost overborne by weariness, hours of anguish awaited for him not only in the garden of Gethsemane and

on Calvary but in many an unrecorded place by the way; but there was no faltering, no hesitation, no groping for the path through the shadows of misunderstanding and the darkness of death. The battle was won once for all in the desert; the spirit triumphed; sin and death were banished from that victorious career. When Christ came forth from the desert to take up the work which he was sent into the world to accomplish, immortality had already taken the sting from death and victory from the grave.

Those who loved him were to see him radiantly alive on Easter morning, for he was to bring life

and immortality to light, and the brightness that streamed from the empty tomb has transformed the graveyards in which they who are sown in weakness shall be raised in power; but it is the spirit, not the body, which is immortal, and spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. The evidence of immortality is wrought into the very structure of our natures. If they who resist evil rise not from the dead, to recall the Apostle of the resurrection, then are they of all men most miserable; for their victory is futile and barren. The victory of the body brings its rewards in physical instincts followed to their end, physical desires

gratified, passion laid to rest by free expression, the love of pleasure satisfied. These are all perishable rewards, for the body is perishable; but they are real and tangible. The man who yields to the temptations of the body gets what he pays for; and the physical life fulfills itself and sinks at last like a flame which, in consuming the fuel that feeds it, accomplishes its purpose.

But the triumphs of the spirit are futile and empty if it does not fulfill itself in activities for which there is neither time nor room here. If the discipline of sorrow and pain and weariness do nothing more than train to purity, obedi-

ence, and unselfishness a spirit which is never to give these divine qualities free scope in conditions that foster and aid them, then life is as meaningless and futile as education would be if it prepared us for tasks, duties, and achievements which had no existence. To impose on children the long and arduous discipline of school, college, and university, and tell them at the end that there is no room, place, or time to use that which they had patiently gained through long years, would be the last sinister irony of a super-deity who was a god without divinity.

The unescapable tests to which all men are subjected, the struggle

to keep the soul alive, the daily assault of temptation, the moral rigor of life, are the premonitions of the splendid opportunity of the spirit; as the hard lessons, the rules and work of the schoolroom are premonitions of the life which is to open wide to training, talent, and character.

Every temptation resisted strengthens and invigorates the spirit, and by the very vitality which it feeds and deepens makes immortality the more inevitable. Every victory of the body over the spirit takes something from the life of the spirit, and blurs the great vision of completed strength for growth and peace and love

which we call heaven; every victory of the spirit over the body makes that vision more real and clear.

The open door of the empty tomb is a symbol of that escape from sin and death, that present entrance into life eternal, which makes every pure and noble life an assurance of immortality. There are those about us whose lives exhale a sweetness not of this world, and whose spirits have no kinship with death. In them the immortal has subdued the mortal, and they have already entered into the peace and rest that are the fruits of the final victory.

THE END

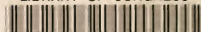
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